

Pressing On
Phil. 3:4b-14
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We have a semi-finished basement at our house that has become a bit of an old toy magnet. It's a great place for the girls to play because there's plenty of room for them to spread out...and because it's the basement. But because it's not all the way finished, they don't play down there very much, so we keep all of their favorite toys upstairs. As those toys outlive their usefulness, they get transferred to the toy dungeon. In our house, if you're a toy and you get moved to the basement, you're probably not going to get a lot more use. It's like Toy Death Row, because the next step after the basement is the trash.

About once or twice a year, Leigh and I will go down there with a couple trash bags and weed out all the toys that used to be so important, but have long since been forgotten. We do this after the girls are asleep, of course, or else they'd never let us toss anything out. A lot of times, as we're cleaning, we'll come across a doll or a stuffed animal that used to go everywhere with us and get daily use. But as the girls get older, they move on to other things. It's funny how things that used to be some important to us lose their value as we grow and mature.

That's what Paul is trying to help the Philippians understand in our passage today. To understand what Paul is saying, it is most helpful to understand the context. Paul is writing this letter from Rome, where he has been put into prison for preaching the Gospel. As far as he knows, this might be the last letter he ever writes to the Philippians, so he wants to make sure he says everything he wants to say.

As was often the case back then, the Philippian church was under attack from opponents to the Gospel. Interestingly enough, the opponents this time were Jews. You see, the Philippian Christians were mostly Gentiles who had come to faith in Jesus Christ without going through the path of Judaism. This irked some of the Jews, who believed that in order to be a Christian, a person had to first become a Jew, which meant going through all the purification and covenant rituals. They were mad that these Gentiles were being given the same status and privileges as them without going through the same process. It's like you've been driving around the parking lot four or five times waiting for a space to come open, and just as you see one open up, a car zips into the parking lot and steals your space. That probably stirs up some unchristian thoughts. No fair, right?

The Gentiles were probably getting nervous because of the pressure they were under from the Jews, so Paul reassures them that there are no prerequisites to faith in Jesus. When the Gentiles tried to plead Paul's case, the Jews said, "Sure, he's a Christian! What does he know about being a Jew?" So Paul lays out his resume.

From a religious standpoint, it's a very impressive one. He was circumcised on his eighth day, which means his parents followed the customary Jewish laws. The tribe of Benjamin was one of the more elite groups in Israel; in fact, Israel's first king, King Saul, came from the line of Benjamin. When Paul says he was a Hebrew of Hebrews, he probably meant that he was not only of Jewish descent, but studied the Hebrew Scriptures and spoke the Hebrew language, which few people did at his time. Paul identifies himself as a Pharisee, one of the most respected religious groups whose job it was to maintain the purity of God's law down to the letter. Paul said he was so full of zeal - a good trait to have in regard to religion - that he persecuted anyone who didn't see things his way. And

finally he says, when it came to legalistic righteousness, he was faultless. Paul was about as perfect a law-abiding, God-worshipping Jew as you could find.

Now, Paul parading out his portfolio may smack of smug self-confidence and blatant braggadocio, but he has a motive. He is basically telling the Philippians – and their opponents – that if anyone knows Judaism, it is him. This is not some tenderfoot Christian blowing off the importance of the Jewish tradition; this is a deeply devout Jew who has given his life to studying the Torah and following God's law.

Which makes Paul's next statement so shocking: "Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ." Now, I'm no financial guru, but I would guess it's a bad thing. Not many companies have thrived by turning profits into losses. Profit good; loss bad. But not for Paul, who says, "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus."

Here's the difference between the old Paul and the new one. The old Paul did everything he could to try and earn righteousness, which simply means God's favor. He was devout, he was zealous, he was faithful, he followed the law to the letter. And yet what he found was that nothing he did could earn him that. He was always falling short. That is, until he met Jesus Christ, who offered him God's favor with no strings attached. Paul didn't have to do anything to earn it; it was a gift given to him through faith in Jesus.

In many ways that goes against our culture, which tells us any benefits we have must be earned. When I was in seminary I did a unit of CPE, which is like an internship as a hospital chaplain. To complete my CPE unit, I had to log 200 hours of hospital visitations. And only when I logged my 200th hour was I able to get my certificate.

Paul says God doesn't require a certain amount of hours before we are considered righteousness. You don't have to log hours in worship or on a committee or teaching Sunday School before you earn God's favor. Before he was a Christian, Paul thought his salvation was up to him; now, through his faith in Christ, he realized it was up to God.

Therefore, everything that came before his faith in Christ Paul calls "rubbish." Like the toys in our basement, it's no longer useful to him. Before, Paul's goal was to earn his way into God's favor. But now Paul has a different goal, and it's completely reshaped the way he lives.

Paul's goal was simple. He says, "I want to know all about Christ so that, somehow, I might attain resurrection." I like the "somehow" in there. Paul doesn't know the particulars of attaining resurrection, but he does know that it comes through knowing Christ, and he's now dedicated his life to that goal.

What is your goal? I'm not talking about a financial goal or a family goal. I'm talking about a faith goal. What are you striving for spiritually? What are you trying to become? Do you come to church because it's the thing to do? Or do you have a goal? When you look at your faith, what would you like to be different about you a year from now? Ten years from now? As a Christian, what's your goal?

Paul thought if you're going to be a Christian you should be like Jesus. So what do you do with all those things in your life that aren't Christ-like, that don't honor Jesus? You look at your pride and your agenda and your priorities and your calendar, and you see what needs to stay and what needs to go in order to become more like Christ.

If we're serious about being Christians, then our goals in life should reflect that. If we are believers in Christ, then we follow someone who was equal to God, but gave that up so that He could come down and be with us, to show us God's love and forgiveness. If Christ was willing to let go of all He was to come down here, are there things we need to

let go of to become more like him? Are there goals we are pursuing that are taking us away from Christ instead of moving us toward him?

The irony of Paul's goal is that it wasn't actually reachable. He could never be just like Christ. But that didn't stop him from trying: "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal." Paul realizes he's not there yet, but is willing to keep moving forward, to keep pressing on.

We're not there yet either, are we? All of us, you and me, have a ways to go before we reach our goal. But that doesn't mean we should stop trying, because I believe we are made perfect in the trying itself. The mark of maturity is to know we are not yet perfect, but to also know that God is still at work in us, renewing us perfecting us more and more each and every day.

We have to be careful at our house when I do the shopping. When Leigh says to get bananas, I get bananas. She doesn't specify what color the bananas should be. So sometimes I come home with green bananas. They're still bananas, right? Does she throw them out because we can't eat them? Of course not. The bananas aren't ready because God's not done making them, so we wait until they are ripe and ready. God is continuing His work in us, ripening us and maturing us so that we can do His work in this world. We may not be where we want to be yet in our faith, we may still be a bit green in some places, but that's all the more reason to keep pressing on.

God is far less concerned about who you were than who you're going to be. Paul used to be a good man. Was there anything wrong with his commitment to his faith? In many ways it was commendable. But it wasn't who God wanted him to be. We very well may be doing good things, but they may not be God things. Listen for God's leading. Read His word. Speak to Him through prayer. Press on toward your goal.

Paul knew God wasn't finished with him yet; God is not finished with us, either. And as we are able to let go of the goals that keep us from a deeper relationship with Christ, we will continue to move closer and closer to our ultimate goal: to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. As Martin Luther said, "The nature of a Christian does not lie in what he or she has become, but in what that person is becoming." What are you becoming?